NormanCenterCityVision

FAQ Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why are we doing the Center City Vision Project?

A: In recent years Norman's Center City has faced increasing redevelopment pressure and the City has found itself in a reactive position, forced to respond to each proposal for a rezoning or special use permit on a case-by-case basis, often by describing what we disliked or what was wrong with a particular project. This makes it difficult to make consistent decisions over time or provide any degree of certainty for either neighborhoods or developers.

The City of Norman and the University of Oklahoma have teamed together to engage the community in an affirmative, proactive manner to define our expectations for future infill or redevelopment in Norman's Center City. We are arranging an intensive public visioning workshop process in order to develop a Center City Vision Plan for the area. This area master plan will also provide the framework for regulating future redevelopment. In order to implement a citizens' vision plan, development regulations that shape the form and functions of buildings will be an important tool.

Q: What are the Center City Vision Project boundaries?

A: In general, the Center City Vision Project boundaries are defined by Gray Street on the north, Flood Street on the west, Boyd Street on the South, and the BNSF Railroad on the east; however, the boundary zigzags in a few places, particularly on the west side. See link for project boundaries map.

Q: Why don't we just use our current zoning?

A.   The Center City has numerous beloved historic buildings scattered throughout; however, most (if not all) were constructed prior to the adoption of the City's first zoning ordinance in 1954. The current ordinance is primarily suburban in nature—i.e. requiring large setbacks and a clear separation of uses, and allowing surface parking lots between the buildings and the street—resulting in auto-oriented development.

Although well intended, the current zoning is what produced most of the development in the Center City that people have become unhappy with. This is not unique to Norman. Most conventional zoning ordinances provide an artificial and misleading level of statistical specificity by regulating development in terms of dwelling units per acre and floor-area ratios (FAR), without a clear goal for the desired form or character of new development.

The current zoning is also out of sync with both the neighborhoods and the market. It has led to some unfortunate "by right" infill development on the one hand, and at the same time requires an arduous, sometimes unpredictable process for rezoning and special use permits to achieve new development that is desirable and fulfills our comprehensive plan goals (such as promoting mixed-use and pedestrian-oriented development). Ideally, our development regulations should make it easy to build the type of development that we say we want and difficult to build in a way that conflicts with the community's vision.

Conventional zoning is a clumsy tool for mixed-use and pedestrian or street-oriented, urban-style neighborhoods. Many of the characteristics of those urban neighborhoods are discouraged or simply not allowed under the existing zoning.

Q: What is a form-based code?

A. It is a way of regulating development that controls building form first and building use second. Its goal is to produce a particular type of "place" or built environment, based on a community-endorsed vision plan.

While conventional zoning controls land-use very strictly, it is usually tied to abstract regulatory statistics that can result in unpredictable physical environments. The basic principal of form-based coding is that design is more important than use. Simple and clear graphic prescriptions for building height, how a building is placed on a site, and building elements (such as windows, doors, etc.) are used to control future development. Land-use is not ignored in form-based coding, but regulated within parameters that allow a better response to market economics, while also prohibiting or restricting undesirable uses.

Form-based codes are about the way buildings relate to the street and public sidewalk and to adjacent buildings; they are not about architectural style.

For more information, see the Form-Based Codes Institute website:
www.formbasedcodes.org

Q: Do form-based codes regulate uses?

A. Yes. Land-use is not ignored, but managed using broad parameters that allow response to market economics. It would be theoretically possible to control uses as strictly in a form-based code as in a conventional zoning system; however, in the best contemporary form-based codes, building form is the primary regulation (particularly for mixed-use districts), with parameters for permitted uses (as well as specific prohibitions for undesirable or inappropriate uses for a given district.)

Form-based codes tend to not be concerned with whether a storefront houses a bookstore, candy store, candlestick or coffee shop—in fact, there is an expectation that building uses will change over time, and with the exception of health and safety related issues, minimal review/regulations should be required when they do. When a form-based code is used for a large, diverse area such as the Center City, different use parameters may be established for different sub-areas, including locations that will likely continue to be limited to residential uses. Other issues are typically addressed through management, enforcement, and/or specific use permits.

Q: Do form-based codes create more bureaucratic red tape?

A: No, a form-based code can actually streamline the development review process because it typically provides clear parameters and more simple administration, which is based on the citizens' Center City Vision Plan. It should become easier to develop properties that follow the Vision Plan and meet the form-based code standards.

Q: Where else have form-based codes been used?

A.   Historically in the United States, many towns regulated development through systems that were primarily form-based. (Two well-known examples are pre-WWII Chicago and Old Town Alexandria in Virginia.) More recently, they are increasingly popular for cities that want to encourage infill development which protects and enhance the existing form and character of the community or specific district.,

Some of these locations are: Arlington, VA; Contra Costa County, CA; Iowa City, IA; Flagstaff, AZ; Hercules, CA; Fayetteville, AR; and Woodford County, KY; Fort Worth, TX; Mesa, AZ; Peoria, IL; Austin, TX (in process); Cincinnati, OH; Benicia, CA; Overland Park, KS; Portsmouth, VA; Farmers Branch, TX; and Livermore, CA.

Q: Will adoption of a form-based code require changing our existing zoning?

A: Form-Based Codes can be adopted under a variety of scenarios, including replacing the existing zoning, creating a special district, or an optional or parallel overlay district. The exact approach for implementing the Center City Vision Plan is yet to be determined.

Q: Will I have to change my building/business/house, etc?

A.   No. All existing buildings and businesses will be "grandfathered in" under any new form-based code. Any new regulations will only take effect if an individual owner chooses to redevelop or expand.